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An Alternate Way to “Feel Good”: Interventions to Promote Self-Compassionate Students and Classrooms

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Abstract

While well intentioned, conflation of self-esteem and wellbeing within the classroom has contributed to inflated grades, overreliance on accolades, and frustrated efforts to promote “feeling good” over building competence. The current paper suggests self-compassion is a viable alternative to the construct of self-esteem that shares significant overlap, but also transcends inherent shortcomings a focus on self-esteem creates. Classroom interventions to promote self-compassion, such as the blessings exercise, relaxation techniques, gratitude visits, and savoring, are outlined, as well as important cultural and developmental considerations.

Keywords: self-esteem, self-compassion, classroom interventions

Preparing students to be productive members of working adult society is a chief objective of academic classrooms and underlying educational policies. In this preparation, it is important that learning environments be both challenging and supportive to students to maximize developmental and academic gains. However, optimal configuration of educational environments is complex and further complicated by increased emphasis on standardization, diminished funding, and greater cultural and social diversity. Coupled with this is a widespread belief emerging in Western culture that to be developmentally healthy, children need high nurturance of self-esteem (Neff, 2009; Neff & Pittman, 2010). Global self-esteem has become synonymous with mental health (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, Solomon, Arndt, & Schimel, 2004).

While well intentioned, conflation of self-esteem and wellbeing within the classroom has contributed to inflated grades, overreliance on accolades, and frustrated efforts to promote “feeling good” over building competence. Self-

improvement is more difficult as constructive or negative feedback may be dismissed or destructive to students’ fragile egos. Additionally, perpetuation of bullying behaviors and relational aggression may be unintended consequences of a focus on self-esteem in school settings, as maintaining a sense of self comes to necessitate downward social comparisons and antagonistic behavior (Neff, 2009; Twenge & Campbell, 2003). With this in mind, the current paper: (a) provides a brief description of self-esteem, as well as a critique of the construct’s relevance to academic outcomes; (b) proposes self-compassion as a viable alternative to self-esteem; (c) outlines several interventions to promote self-compassion in classrooms; and (d) discusses cultural and developmental considerations related to promoting self-compassionate classrooms and students.

Self-Esteem

Self-esteem, is one of three constructs contributing to an overall “sense of self”

(Humphrey, 2004). The first of these, self-concept, encompasses an individual's perceived competencies. Second, ideal self is aspirational in nature and refers to how an individual would like to be. Finally, self-esteem is an evaluation of self-worth based on discrepancies between the first two components, or between current perceptions of self and the ideal-self. The notion of self-esteem resonates powerfully in American culture and is referred to frequently and ubiquitously in educational policy and debate. However, in this rhetoric, self-esteem is often poorly defined, rendering assessment of contributing factors and effective interventions difficult.

Within the educational field, the "Self-Esteem Movement" peaked in the last two decades of the 21st century (Dweck, 2002). As part of this, the California Task Force on Self-Esteem was formed and granted a three-year operating budget of over \$700,000. The task force was commissioned to author a book, *The Social Importance of Self-Esteem*, to explore casual connections between self-esteem and important social problems, including teenage pregnancy, academic achievement, and drug and alcohol abuse, among others (Vasconello, 1990). However, the task force failed to establish hypothesized relationships, with most associations between self-esteem and social outcomes yielding mixed, weak, or even inverse relationships (Kahne, 1996). Further, in a large scale review of articles published on self-esteem and academic outcomes, Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, and Vohs (2003) summarized two widespread conclusions. First, evidence suggests self-esteem has no impact of subsequent academic achievement. Second, relatively little evidence substantiates how self-esteem programs or interventions affect self-esteem.

While the construct of self-esteem is pervasive in educational dialogue and interventions, the relevance of self-esteem in learning contexts is unclear, at best. Strong positive relationships between self-esteem and academic outcomes are not well established and

existing interventions appear ineffective. Further, focus on self-esteem appears to have unintended and undesirable consequences in school settings. Despite this status, completely abandoning the importance of positive learning environments seems misguided. Rather, exploration of alternative ways to "feel good" is warranted.

Self-Compassion

Self-compassion is an alternate way to conceptualize having a healthy stance toward oneself that does not involve evaluations of self-worth (Neff 2003a, 2002b). It is founded on the idea that while individuals tend to demonstrate kindness and compassion towards others, harsh and unjust criticisms are often directed towards oneself. Self-compassion directs individuals to turn this compassion inward. As defined by Neff (2003a, 2003b), self-compassion involves three interrelated components: self-kindness, common humanity, and mindful awareness. Self-kindness entails extending kindness and understanding to oneself instead of harsh judgment and self-criticism. Common humanity encompasses seeing one's experiences as part of the larger human experience rather than as separating and isolating. Finally, mindfulness is the process of holding painful thoughts and feelings in balanced awareness rather than over-identifying with them. Mindfulness is perhaps the crux of the process of self-compassion, as a certain degree of mindfulness must be present in order to allow for enough mental space from one's negative experiences so that self-kindness and common humanity can arise.

While the construct of self-compassion shares some overlap with self-esteem, several important distinctions exist. Among these, as opposed to self-esteem, self-compassion is not based on self-evaluations, social comparisons, or personal success (Neff & Vonk, 2009). In short, self-esteem is dependent on external outcomes; self-compassion on processes of personal growth and connection to others through shared experience.

Self-compassion can be operationalized and measured using the Self-Compassion Scale (SCS, Neff, 2003a). Validation research of the SCS reveals strong concurrent, discriminate, and convergent validity. Specifically, as compared to self-esteem, self-compassion is associated with less anxiety, depression, rumination, narcissism, thought suppression, and perfectionism (Neff & Lamb, 2009). Additionally, self-compassion and self-esteem are equivalent predictors of happiness, optimism, and positive affect (Neff & Vonk, 2009). This supports self-compassion as a distinct construct from self-esteem.

In addition to support of the relationship between self-compassion and psychological wellbeing, self-compassion appears related to academic goals and perceptions of success or failure. Self-compassion is positively associated with mastery goals (i.e., joy in learning) and negatively associated with performance goals (i.e., achieving high grades). Additionally, self-compassionate students tend to employ greater emotion-focused coping strategies versus avoidance-oriented strategies when confronting academic failure (Neff, Hsieh, & Dejterat, 2005). Given the relationship between a student's self-compassion and wellbeing and performance, discussion of interventions that foster this construct is warranted.

Interventions

Self-compassion is adaptive to academics and learning, as self-compassionate students better cope with academic failures and are more likely to work towards mastery goals. Because these students are able to take academic disappointments in stride, they maintain and build self-confidence in learning. Therefore, deliberately promoting self-compassion strategies in schools may improve students' well-being. Many empirically validated interventions, specifically; the blessings exercise, relaxation techniques, gratitude visits, and savoring, can be easily incorporated into the classroom.

The blessings exercise, which encourages

students to reflect back on their day and choose three things that went well, as well as the reasons they went well, can be implemented at the end of the school day to a large group of students.

Students may keep their list of blessings in a journal at school or they may complete this exercise at home. Studies have shown that reflecting on positive experiences, or "counting blessings" daily for two weeks increased self-reported gratitude, optimism, life satisfaction, and decreased negative affect (Froh, Miller, & Snyder, 2007). Counting blessings has more than just social and emotional benefits. In one study involving seventh and eighth graders, participation in the blessings exercise had a positive impact on their satisfaction with their overall school experience and this may promote academic gains (Froh, Sefick, & Emmons, 2008).

Researchers approximate that 40% of an individual's happiness is due to intentional activities. Expressing gratitude and recalling positive experiences are intentional activities that may lead to self-kindness and mindfulness. In one study involving college-aged students, researchers found that writing three letters of gratitude positively impacted students' levels of happiness and gratitude (Toepfer & Walker, 2009). Similarly, positive effects have been found when individuals write and then deliver a letter of gratitude to someone who has never been appropriately thanked. Increased levels of happiness (as well as decreased levels of depressive symptoms) were measured one month after delivering letters (Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005). Having students take time to write and deliver letters of gratitude to people they never thanked, may lead to increased levels of happiness.

Savoring refers to the act of remembering and reflecting on past pleasurable experiences and has also been shown to increase levels of happiness.

Young students were asked to reminisce about pleasant images using either mental imagery or memorabilia two times a day for one week, and both groups reported increases in the amount of

time they felt happy. The frequency of savoring these memories also predicted perceived ability to enjoy life (Bryant, Smart, & King, 2005). Having children savor positive events that occurred during the day may lead to prolonging that feeling of happiness and enhance their feelings in their present situation.

Anxiety is often a barrier to happiness and has adverse affects on learning and student engagement. Incorporating relaxation techniques into the classroom may reduce feelings of anxiety and increase learning and performance. Many relaxation techniques have been shown to reduce adolescents' state anxiety (Rasid & Parish, 1998). Engaging in the "feet and seat" exercise may help decrease anxiety and increase mindfulness in students, and is conducive to the classroom as it is simple and time efficient. During this exercise, students are guided through a relaxation technique in which they take time to become aware of the sensations in their body as they are seated in their desk while simultaneously engaging in deep breathing. One study demonstrated that engaging in this exercise when feeling angry may decrease physical and verbal aggression in children (Singh, Lancioni, & Winton, 2007). Many scripts, audio files, and related relaxation techniques and exercises are available for free online.

There are also a number of strategies that are more conducive to a small group or one-on-one settings outside of the classroom. These exercises tend to be effective for older students who possess insight into their own actions and thought patterns. Self-compassion exercises that rely heavily on journaling, inner dialogue, and in-depth conversation and dialogue fall into this category. Although these strategies are not necessarily conducive to the classroom environment, they may be useful for professionals within schools that work with students in a small group or one on one settings (i.e., school counselors, school psychologists and social workers, or other related services professionals).

Discussion

Self-compassion affords an alternate lens for educators and other professionals to conceptualize and approach student well-being. Compared to self-esteem, self-compassion is an equivalent predictor of optimism and positive affect, but it less associated with anxiety, depression, and perfectionism. The presently outlined interventions provide a mechanism to assist students to build self-confidence in learning, while also better coping with academic challenges. While self-compassion is a viable alternative to promote "feeling good", application within classrooms necessitates discussion of potential cultural and developmental considerations.

Cultural Considerations

Self-compassion is derived from Buddhist psychology. The three constructs of self-compassion – self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness- partially contradict pervasive values in Western culture surrounding self-determination, productivity as an indicator of self-worth, and competition. Cross-cultural comparison of self-compassion levels in the United States, Thailand, and Taiwan indicated self-compassion is highest in Thailand and lowest in Taiwan. Additionally, whereas self-compassion is associated with interdependence in Thailand, self-compassion is linked to independence in the United States and Taiwan (Neff, Pisitsungkagarn, & Hsieh, 2008).

These findings hold several implications for integration of self-compassion interventions in the classroom. First, emphasizing self-compassion may require reconceptualization of ideas about success, reward, and relationships between students and teachers. Second, careful consideration should be given to students' cultural and family values. Classrooms should foster reflection and personal definitions of self-compassion over blanket applications. Finally, a paradigm shift towards self-compassion and away from self-esteem may be a slow process.

However, given the advantages of fostering self-compassion over inflated notions of self-esteem, patience and perseverance in this process seems justified. Autonomy and connectedness need not be mutually exclusive (Guisinger & Blatt, 1994).

Developmental Considerations

The majority of research on self-compassion to date has focused on adults. However, attention is beginning to shift towards children and adolescents. Neff & McGehee (2009) examined self-compassion in teens. Results indicated self-compassion manifests similarly in this age group. As identity formation is a critical developmental task, further research on self-compassion among different age groups and academic settings is important.

When implementing the self-compassion interventions described in this paper, teachers and other professionals should consider relevant developmental tasks for target groups. For example, within an elementary classroom, common humanity may center on empathy and cooperation. Within a high school setting, relevant concerns may be more global or philosophical. Attention should also be given to modifying intervention materials and processing questions/purposes.

Summary

Fostering student wellbeing and success is paramount to educators. However, it appears approaching this mission through the lens of self-esteem has contributed to problematic outcomes in today's classrooms. Specifically, concerns related to safeguarding self-esteem have led to inflated grades, self-evaluations that are dependent on the devaluation of others, and outcome driven constructions of self and of success. Self-compassion offers an alternate conceptualization of a healthy attitude toward oneself. By utilizing the described interventions, educators become better equipped to assist students in adopting attitudes toward oneself and others that maintain high standards, while also

providing a broader context for understanding these successes, as well as life's inevitable challenges.

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